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THE TIMOR AFFAIR AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN POLICY

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The aim of my talk today is to discuss in broad outline the Timor tragedy, and to seek to place the issue into a wider perspective, in an effort to bring into focus its significance as a lesson about our foreign policy attitudes, about the changes that have taken place in our thinking in our short history of active diplomacy, and not least about the changes that have not taken place. It might well be asked, why choose Timor? It has only attracted our attention for brief periods, and our contacts with the Portuguese colony have been few and tenuous since the end of World War II.

This is of course true. We have not given much attention to this small, underdeveloped territory of some 19,000 sq. kms and with a population of about 650,000 in 1974. It has rated little more than an occasional passing glance in the past three decades of policy-making. Indeed, to our diplomatic service it became a kind of departmental joke. To be posted to Dili, with its remoteness, its slow and underdeveloped life style, was to many, the Siberia, the salt mines, the penal servitude of overseas service. It was the forgotten posting, and departmental cables and memoranda for general circulation were, in other than rare cases, addressed "to all posts except Dili".

Yet the territory, at least in retrospect, has a much deeper meaning for Australia. We must face up to the fact that Australian actions or policies unwittingly precipitated or accommodated the ravaging of this small and vulnerable territory - one of our nearest neighbours - not just once, but on two occasions within little more than a generation: the first time when our security was under threat in the dark days in the immediate aftermath of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, and, secondly, in 1975 when East Timor's very survival was at stake.

Let me turn briefly to the first of these events, which began almost 40 years ago. On 17 December 1941, only ten days after the Japanese surprise

attack on Pearl Harbour, on the basis of little more than a conjecture that the Japanese would invade East Timor and set up a base there for an attack against Australia, Australian troops, together with a contingent of Dutch soldiers, landed at Portuguese Timor, ignoring the protests of the Portuguese Governor. That is to say, in international legal terms we invaded Timor. Our forces moved to the hinterland and at once began to mobilize the support of the Timorese population: and as the commander was later to record, it was the whole hearted response of the Timorese that made possible what has been regarded as one of the Australian military epics of the war. In short, the first wave of some 6000 Japanese was unable to cope with a guerilla operation which involved no more than 400 Australian commandos. The Japanese therefore sent in a crack division, the 48th, and within six months or so the gallant commando force was compelled to evacuate from Timor's south coast to Darwin. In our war histories this guerrilla campaign is regarded as one of the great Australian success stories of the Pacific War. It pinned down thousands of Japanese troops and may have slowed their advance south.

But I want to draw your attention to another important aspect of the campaign. In fact Allied troops breached the neutrality of East Timor - a territory that might well have escaped the ravages of a war that meant nothing to its population, - involved the people in the Allied cause and then, for whatever reasons, abandoned them to the whims of a vengeful invader. The consequences have not of course absorbed the attention of war historians, but, from my own studies of the subject, it led to East Timor becoming one of the worst victims of the Pacific War. The Japanese scoured the areas where the Australians had been operating, razing villages to the ground, and executing the gallant Timorese who had worked with them. The Timorese were then subjected to a harsh occupation. Their women were raped, the men forced into labour gangs, and their meagre food supplies were seized.

According to a Australian intelligence report, near the end of the War, Japanese demands for food were roughly equivalent to the level of production of the time. To add to their misery, the Timorese were subjected to continuous Allied bombing from bases in Darwin. When the War ended the horrific consequences of our act of intrusion were in shocking evidence. It was a devastated land inhabited by a people barely alive. The total loss of life, resulting from the war, was probably over 60,000, that is more than twice our own total losses in all theatres of the Second World War. According to the 1930 census the population of the colony was then 472,000; in 1947 it was estimated at no more than 433,000 people. But these humanitarian consequences of our moves to stay the Japanese thrust did not greatly interest the Government of the time. We had driven out the Japanese and the Timorese people should be grateful to their liberators. Their devastation was a Japanese crime, and it was up to the Portuguese to press for appropriate reparations.

Until 1961 we still considered the Timor colony a territory of potential strategic importance, although we took little interest in its people, or for that matter in the Portuguese themselves. Our attitudes could perhaps be described, at the risk of over-simplification, as being dominated in the post-war years (especially during the height of the Cold War) by fear of those countries which posed potential threats to Australian security, and concern to maintain the committment to our defence of those powerful friends, namely the United States and Great Britain, who could provide us with the necessary assistance in the event of such a threat becoming a reality. In the late fifties and early sixties the subject of our immediate concern was Indonesia, until after the coup which deposed Sukarno and brought to power the military regime of President Suharto, - a conveniently anti-Communist regime which sought to allay the fears of Indonesia's neighbours that its leaders were bent on territorial expansion. I should like to throw in the suggestion here that our feelings of insecurity in the lucky country

of milk and honey, our fears of outside threats have caused our attention to be absorbed by the large and potentially powerful or threatening states of Asia, or the economically powerful - that is; Indonesia, China, Japan, and more recently Vietnam - and almost to ignore the smaller states. In the uncertain world of increasing multi-polarity, Australia's coming to terms with these shifts in the international system has been more the consequence of our persistent feelings of insecurity than a conviction that we should try to get to know the world around us better, so that Australia might play a more constructive role towards the shaping of a safer and more just world.

As we became more and more preoccupied with "coming to terms with Asia" our interest in our seemingly unimportant and insignificant neighbouring territories diminished. Also, in the early 1960s, in the case of East Timor, as in the case of West New Guinea, the Chiefs of Staff of the Defence forces concluded that the neighbouring territories were no longer of such crucial importance to Australia's defence, and their eventual incorporation into Indonesia would not be disadvantageous to Australia's strategic interests; indeed such a change could offer some advantages. Indonesia had repeatedly asserted that it had no claim to East Timor, but, with the experience of West Timor in mind, many Australians in policy-making positions, not to speak of academics and the politicians themselves, perceived a de facto claim or entitlement, sometimes based on ignorance. Most of the East Timorese were rather different ethno-linguistically from the peoples of the neighbouring Indonesian islands, some of them with distinctly different cultural characteristics resulting from four centuries of Portuguese colonial influence. It seems that it was such an attitude that prompted Mr. Bill Morrison to use the following quote from an Indonesian newspaper in Parliament in 1975 "... Although Indonesia makes no legal claim whatsoever to Portuguese Timor, it regards the territiory as geographically a part of the Indonesian world".[1] In point of fact, this kind of judgement would have denied independence to more than a dozen colonies, which have emerged into nationhood in other parts

of the world in the past ten years or so.

Let me now turn to the tragic events that have occurred in East Timor during the past six years. Just seven years ago, on 25 April 1974, the relative quiet and calm of Portuguese Timor was suddenly and unexpectedly disturbed when a coup in distant Lisbon, which had been engineered by a dissident group of young army officers, deposed the Salazarist regime of Prime Minister Caetano, and replaced it with a new generation of leaders, who announced as one of their first decisions that the component parts of Portugal's sprawling empire would in due course be allowed to determine their own future. And this decision was to apply to the Timor colony, which had for some years been in a kind of sleepy isolation, sealed off as it were, from the dramatic upheavals that had occurred in most parts of the great Asian continent as the large European colonial empires were dismantled, giving birth to a new generation of independent states of a variety of political complexions.

Although the territory of East Timor was small, politically and economically undeveloped, and was totally unprepared by the Portuguese for other than an indefinite continuation of colonial rule, conditions, seemed propitious, at least on the surface, for a smooth process of decolonization. In spite of the colony's backwardness, there was no rebellion in progress, no armed insurgency as in the case of Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique, and the young leaders of the political parties which were soon to emerge, were quite realistic about the future, insisting that the decolonisation should take place over a long period of time, ranging from 8 to 12 years. Furthermore, political differences between the two major parties, the Timorese Democratic Union and the Social Democrats (later to be called Fretilin) were not so great as to undermine prospects for cooperation and a reasonably harmonious progress towards an act of self-determination, and ultimately independence. In the first months, even the international regional environment seemed encouraging. The first Timorese

visitor to Jakarta after April 1974, Jose Ramos Horta, was rewarded with a letter from the then Indonesian Foreign Minister, Adam Malik, which assured the Timorese that their independence was a right, and that they could rely on their populous neighbour to support decolonization.

Then there was the position of Australia, which, as both the Portuguese and the Timorese saw it in those early months, could be crucial to the entire decolonisation process. And Australia seemed a natural source of moral, political and economic support. To the young Timorese who were now talking excitedly and enthusiastically about the future, at last with the colonial barrier being lowered, Australia had an opportunity to repay the debt, arising out of Australia's intervention during the Second World War, which was very much on their minds, even if it had been overlooked and forgotten in this country. The Timorese noted that the Whitlam Government had strongly supported it for the right of self determination and for decolonization - and had indeed urged the Portuguese to declare their overseas territories non-self-governing. Furthermore, Australian had a good record in Papua New Guinea which was nearing independence. Australia also was a major provider of development assistance to the nations of the region, and East Timor was the only neighbouring territory not yet to have been the recipient of an Australian aid programme. Finally, the Whitlam Government enjoyed good relations with the Suharto regime and would therefore be in a crucial position to persuade the Indonesians not to undermine the process of decolonization.

The optimism of the mid-1974 period soon began to flag as none of these expectations was realised, and within 16 months the territory was caught up in the throes of a brief civil war; four months later, on the 34th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, Indonesian forces launched a combined assault on Dili, beginning a long, lonely and bitter struggle by Timorese resistance forces against hopeless odds, against an invader whose forces behaved with brutal disregard for the people which Indonesia cynically and falsely claimed were seeking integration. By 1980 the Timorese were a broken

people, under virtual occupation by the Indonesian armed forces, and with their population decimated. No one probably knows the exact loss of life, but it is my assessment that between 100,000 and 300,000 Timorese have perished as a direct or indirect consequence of the Indonesian invasion, and the subsequent military operations to suppress the Fretilin resistance, and bring the population at large to heel. And this is not to mention the raping of young women and the pillaging of the modest possessions of the Timorese people.

It is my contention that Australia played a major role, no doubt unwittingly, in making possible this gross violation of the U.N. Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, U.N. Resolution 1515 of 1960, and other relevant resolutions to which this country a party. The Whitlam Government knew very well that Adam Malik's magnanimous offer to Horta was not shared by a group of Indonesian generals, who were eager that East Timor be integrated into the Republic, and by making it clear to President Suharto at Wonosobo in 1974 and again in Townsville in 1975 that he favoured Indonesia's acquisition of the territory, the Prime Minister, again no doubt unwittingly, gave the green light to the launching of a subversive operation, led by generals Moertopo and Yoga Sugama, who were very close to the President. This operation, codenamed "Komodo", was designed to destabilize the political situation in the Portuguese colony, and thus to undermine the independence movement and bring integration in disregard of real wishes of the Timorese. The work of this intelligence operation was the biggest single factor behind the brief civil war between Fretilin and UDT. The fact that, from Jakarta's point of view, the wrong side won the war prompted the Indonesians to intervene militarily in East Timor.

But there is more to the Timor tragedy from the point of view of Australia's involvement. The Government of the time was well aware that the Indonesians were out to subvert East Timor's right to self determination as early as the first months of 1975, and government officials were also aware that several powerful generals were pressing for the use of military force in pursuit of their

objectives, It was also well known in Canberra that the vast majority of the Timorese were not disposed to favour integration, and that their opposition to this option was, if any thing, likely to increase. Yet the Government of the time confined Australia's role to expressing persistently its preference for integration, which, however, ought to be achieved by means of "an internationally acceptable act of self determination", in effect, pressing for two absolutely incompatible objectives. Perhaps what we had in mind was not a real act of self determination but some cosmetic touch, like West Irian's "act of free choice" which the international community could be induced to come to terms with, in the name of its actions of being "realistic". As in 1942 the Australian Government hardly gave a thought to the consequences of its actions for the Timorese. Yet between mid-1974 and December 1975, Australia was in a position to prevent the second rape of the Timorese people within 40 years. Contrary to the situation in 1942, this time East Timor's security was at stake, and the Timorese and the Portuguese again and again appealed to the Whitlam Government to take an active interest in the decolonisation of the colony, in order to facilitate a meaningful act of self-determination and to persuade Indonesia to accept its outcome. Yet a very cynical view prevailed in this country which, I suggest, was well placed to use its considerable diplomatic resources not only in Jakarta, but also in the capitals those countries of great economic and strategic importance to Indonesia - for example, in the United States, the Netherlands, West Germany, Britain and Japan - to deter Indonesia from a course of action that was not only a serious contravention of the U.N. Charter, but that was also bound to have calamitous consequences. Australia knew that President Suharto, and certain other members of his government, did not favour the use of force against Timor, and thus concerted diplomatic approach in 1975 would almost certainly have averted the Timor tragedy. Moreover, it was the one case in our diplomatic history where an Australian initiative could have saved the day. We could have pressed

for the involvement of the United Nations in one of the few international disputes, in which the world body would have had some prospect of successful intervention. Yet the Australian Government was clearly unenthusiastic for U.N. involvement. As Mr. Whitlam said in the House on 26 August 1975...."it is not easy to see how a U.N. good offices committee, whose role would be essentially political in character, could function on the ground".

Australia tried to look concerned, but in reality it did nothing to head off Indonesia's military objectives. In a confidential cable, which has now been made public on several occasions, Mr Woolcott, our Ambassador in Jakarta, seemed to sum up the true character of Australia's Timor policy when he urge that it "should be based on disengaging ourselves as far as possible from the Timor question; getting Australians presently there out of Timor; leave events to take their course; and if and when Indonesia does intervene act in a way which would be designed to minimise the public impact in Australia and show privately understanding to Indonesia of their problems."[3] Events did, as we have seen, take their course and at that crucial time Australia did nothing to change it. Indeed, our Ambassador in Jakarta urged that the Prime Minster not send a letter to the Indonesian President reminding Suharto of his earlier undertaking at Townsville not to use force, because the Indonesia leader, according to our ambassador, would not have welcomed such a letter at that stage. The President would not welcome a lecture; he would in fact be looking to Australia for understanding.

In fairness to Mr Whitlam, 1975 was an extremely difficult year, and it is unlikeythat he was able to give full attention to the Timor problem. We might well ask ourselves; had Mr. Fraser been Prime Minister would he have acted differently? There is no answer to such a hyperthetical question, but Mr. Fraser did apparently share the then Prime Minister's view about the overriding importance of the relationship with Jakarta. In his recent book, "Suharto's Indonesia",[4] Hamish McDonald noted that Lt. General Yoga Sugama made a quiet visit to Australia in May 1975 and, "sounded out, among others,

Opposition Leader Malcolm Fraser, and found no reason for alarm". Although Andrew Peacock developed a sympathetic interest in the situation in East Timor, it does not seem to have excited the interest of his front bench colleagues. Moreover, the Fraser government came into office almost four weeks before the invasion of Dili. It presumably had at its ready disposal the real facts about the situtation, not least Mr Pritchett's appeal to the Government, some four weeks earlier, to take a second look at a policy that, apart from bringing disaster to the Timorese, was going to do nothing for the Australian-Indonesian relationship. Yet apart from Mr Peacock's spirited protest after the invasion, the Fraser Government in fact soon chose to accomodate Indonesia's annexation of the small territory, rather than concern itself with what was happening to the embattled Timorese. December 1975 was a late hour for an Australian initiative, but it was not too late.

Australia has always known more about the real situation in Timor than have other countries. Even after the invasion it was within our power to bring international pressure to bear on Indonesia to withdraw her troops. However, Australia hastened to "come to terms with the reality" and within a short time she was counselling other countries to do likewise. Within a year of the invasion we changed our vote to abstention in the United Nations, and in January 1978, only 3 or 4 days after Australia had become a member of the U.N. Commission on Human rights, the Government announced its recognition of East Timor as de facto part of Indonesia, an action taken by political parties that had so vehemently criticized the Whitlam Goverment's decision to recognise the incorporation of the Baltic States into the USSR. In fact, as it turned out our de facto recognition was announced at a time when the Timorese resistance was still fighting bitterly against the Indonesian forces, who at that time occupied only about a quarter of the territory at the most. Let me quote from the letter of a priest which was written only a few weeks before this recognition was accorded. Since September 1977, he wrote; "the

war has again intensified. The bombers do not stop all day. Hundreds of human beings die every day. The bodies of the victims become food for vultures... villages were completely destroyed, some tribes decimated... and the war enters its third year with no promise of an early end in sight. The barbarities, the cruelties, the pillaging, the unqualified destruction of Timor, the executions without reason, in a word all the organised evil, has spread deep roots in Timor. There is complete insecurity and the terror of arbitrary imprisonment is our daily bread..." He finishes with a plaintive plea..."Please do something positive for the liberty of the Timorese people. The world ignores us and our grief".[5] That same year Australia changed its vote in the U.N. to one of support for Indonesia. And as we have seen, the plea fell on deaf ears. Yet less than two months after the priest wrote his empassioned plea for help Australia made the following statement in the United Nations General Assembly. "Australia takes its human rights seriously. Our election to the U.N. Human Rights Commission in May of this year gives an additional reason for doing so. The question of human rights is too important to be dealt with in terms of rhetoric and gesture. It is too important to be subordinated to political manoeuvre or made a matter of public relations. It is related in the most direct way to questions of human suffering, human dignity and freedom. If we cannot take it seriously we would do better to stop talking about it at all".[6]

To be fair Australia began to send humanitarian relief to East Timor, but this relief was channelled in such a way as to accomodate Indonesian sensitivities, and the question of the human rights of the Timorese was thus very carefully avoided. Indeed, during those terrible years when the Timorese suffered so much at the hands of an indisciplined and ruthless Indonesian military force, no Australian word of protest was ever lodged in Jakarta, and, if anything, Australia sought in the various international fora to deflect criticism of this brutal act of annexation, and to question the credibility of the persistent efforts by a wide variety of sources to draw

attention to the terrible dimensions of the suffering of the Timorese. In short, Australia abondoned them to their fate, and the clear message behind our humanitarian aid consignments - a salve to the Australian political conscience was - "put some food in their stomachs, some ointment on their wounds, and leave the rest to Indonesian goodwill. In due course the Timorese will come to terms with the realities of their situation...."

But the situation clearly cannot be resolved as easily as that. As a Timorese leader who had not long left the country told me last year. "We are now getting some international relief, some food in our stomachs. But the outside world cannot know how bitterly hurt my people feel They have been raped and they have been left at the disposal of the rapist." Perhaps by now many have already become resigned to their fate. A few months ago a priest told the New York Times correspondent, Henry Kamm, "it is a situation beyond our force. I think it is the destiny of small countries. We have to accept".

The Timor affair has been one of the bloodiest episodes of its kind in modern history. It is a matter of abnegation of responsibility on the part of the Portuguese. A matter of disgrace to Indonesia, and a matter of shame to Australia. Both the Whitlam and Fraser governments accommodated, no doubt without enthusiasm, one of the most serious denials of those basic rights we have so loudly proclaimed our committment to in the United Nations and elsewhere. The episode exposes the alarmingly wide gap between the rhetoric and the reality of our political attitudes, our principles and our values. Above all, it revealed just how intimidated we had become in our relations with our populous and sometimes restless Asian neighbour. What really dominated our thinking was that we should at all costs preserve the harmonious relationship with Jakarta. But it was in reality a thinly-based fragile link between peoples who know little about each other, and who are ever distrustful of each other's moves and motives. If Australia is to have a meaningful relationship with a nation like Indonesia, it needs to be

placed in a much more frank and understanding context. The Timor affair illustrates not merely the futility of a pandering, superficial link with a regime like the one presently in power in Jakarta. Perhaps we have encouraged a trend with potentially serious implications for our own future security. Also accomodating Indonesia's act of annexation this country has brought shame on its name in the small community of states which are genuinely concerned about human rights. Inevitably, conflicting Australian public and political reactions have brought strains on relations between Jakarta and Canberra. The irony of it all is that had we pressed for Indonesia to honour Timor's right to self determination, although we would probably have irritated the Indonesian generals we would at least have won their respect.

The Timor affair raises the important question of Australia's attitude towards small states. We have more mini-states in our vicinity than have other countries of our size and power. Moreover, these states depend on an Australian response in the event of some threat to their security, or some natural disaster. Our Timor policies have seriously harmed our standing in the mini-state community.

Finally, the Timor affair exposes a basic weakness an inconsistency in our committment to questions of human rights. Australia, with its much vaunted democratic traditions, has a vital, although sensitive, role to play in this region. But our greatest challenge, in this important area of foreign policy is not the way we respond to distant issues, where we are merely joining in a show of hands, but about our performance in those situations in which an Australian role is likely to have a significant effect on the outcome. It is also in these circumstances that Australia's sincerity and integrity will be most strictly tested. Our performance in relation to the tragedy of East Timor, where Australia had a special debt to honour, was, without doubt, our most dismal failure.

NOTES.

1. Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, 25 February 1975.
2. Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, 26 August 1975.
3. "The Canberra Times", 16 January 1976.
4. Hamish McDonald, Suharto's Indonesia, p. 204 (Fontana/Collins, 1980).
5. Letter to two Dominican Nuns, stated November 1977.
6. Australian Foreign Affairs Record, October 1977, p. 515.